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Postdramatic Theatre and the Persistence of the “Fictive Cosmos”: A View from America

Of all the theories of new theater advanced in the near half-century since the beginning of the epoch of “performance theater”– that is, theater variously liberated from (or, as some would say, deprived of) text, of dialogue, of plot and character – Hans-Thies Lehmann’s theory of theater cut loose from the “fictive cosmos” of drama has been the most far-ranging.[1] According to Lehmann, theater became “postdramatic” on giving up the comprehensive trait that makes drama dramatic, a fictional world that aligns all dramaturgical elements into a synthetic whole. Lehmann’s critical gesture made connections visible amongst widely different styles of so-called “avant-garde” theater work, relating them vertically through time as well as horizontally across diverse theater cultures. The connecting link he sees in this great range of styles, effects, and affects, is that since some time in the 1960s, works of theater have declared independence from the story-telling and integrated illusory “world” of traditional drama. Lehmann places his argument in a lineage of dramatic theory and criticism that extends from Aristotle through Hegel to Peter Szondi. In *Theory of the Modern Drama*, Szondi describes the era of the dramatic as beginning in the Renaissance and intensifying in the 17th century with the

[1] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London and New York: 2006), hereinafter abbreviated as PDT, p. 33 and *passim*. The term “performance theater” has occasionally cropped up in the critical vocabulary struggling to distinguish certain forms of contemporary theater from conventional dramatic theater. I thought I coined it in *The Death of Character* (Indiana, 1996, p. 79), then discovered it in Michael Vanden Heuvel, *Performing Drama/Dramatizing Performance* (Michigan, 1991). Apparently independently of Vanden Heuvel and Fuchs it appears in Gay McAuley, “Performance Studies: Definitions, Methodologies, Future Directions,” *Australasian Drama Studies* 39 (2001), 17. More common adjectives used to describe this range of hybrid theatrical performance are *avant-garde, experimental, alternative, devised* and *postmodern*.

victory of dialogue over all other forms of stage communication. Thus, follows Lehmann, Attic theatre with its reliance on the Chorus is pre-dramatic and Racine is dramatic. But at the end of the 19thth century, a crisis of the dramatic, witnessed in the failure of "absolute dialogue," begins to emerge, preparing the way for the "postdramatic." Szondi discusses the work of several modern playwrights as "tentative solutions" to this crisis, among which is Brecht's Epic Theater. Thus Brecht becomes, among others, a kind of boundary marker of the dramatic form.

Lehmann broadens Szondi's archaeology of drama to follow not only the decay of dialogue, but the mutual estrangement of drama and theater. While Brecht offers insight into this process, Lehmann does not see him as an usher at the funeral of drama. Rather it is after "a whole line of theater that led from Artaud and Grotowski to the Living Theatre and Robert Wilson" (PDT 30) that theater comes uncoupled from the fictive cosmos of the play and attaches directly to the "situation" of actual performance.

Lehmann's term "postdramatic"– not his sole invention though he is responsible for its definition and elaboration – seemed to portend, if not exactly predict, the end of the dramatic form.[2] The critical debate swirling around the term has been substantial, and I do not propose to review it here. Rather I want to weigh the question: What has happened to this looming portent? A decade and more after the publication of Lehmann's book, is the dramatic form closer to exhaustion?

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Postdramatic theater begins in the American neo-avant garde of the 1960s. It was led by the Living Theatre and Joseph Chaikin, followed in the late 1960s by Robert Wilson's School of Byrds and Foreman's Ontological Hysteric theater, then Mabou Mines in 1970, and the Wooster Group in 1975. This movement was soaked in European influences, whether directly (for instance, the Living Theatre's origins in Piscator's New School classes attended by Judith Malina and Julian Beck, and Mabou Mines' 1969 *Wanderjahre* abroad), or indirectly, for instance Wilson's training in architecture and painting, and Elizabeth LeCompte's in fine art. Wilson's work was famously hailed by Louis

[2] According to Christel Weiler's entry on *Postdramatisches Theater* in Erika Fischer--Lichte, Doris Kolesch and Matthias Warstat, eds., *Metzler Lexikon Theatertheorie (*Berlin, 2005), the term "postdramatic" was first used by Andrzej Wirth, founder and director of the program in Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft at the Justus Liebig University in Giessen.

Aragon as the fulfillment of Surrealism's dream of a surrealist theater. The American work was already in part European.

Cast with amateur performers and working against vast visual panoramas often encompassing the history of planetary life, with no through narrative line, Wilson's early pieces released the components of drama into a weightless suspension. Or in Lehmann's words:

> *When it is obviously no longer simply a matter of broken dramatic illusion or epicizing distance; when obviously neither plots, nor plastically shaped dramatis personae are needed; when neither dramatic-dialectic collision of values nor even identifiable figures are necessary to produce 'theatre'...then the concept of drama – however differentiated, all-embracing, and watered-down it may become – retains so little substance that it loses its cognitive value.* (PDT, 34)

Lehmann's study owes its inception to his encounter in the 1980s with Wilson, whose influence in Europe, and especially Germany, can scarcely be exaggerated. Yet in identifying Wilson as the germinal impulse of the postdramatic, Lehmann may be overstating the demise of the dramatic impulse in contemporary performance theater, especially that emanating from the United States. Less than a year after the premiere of Wilson/Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, the Wooster Group – eventually perhaps even more influential than Wilson on succeeding generations of postdramatic theater artists – began to introduce *Three Pieces in Rhode Island*, the performance pieces created from Spalding Gray's autobiography. For all their exhilarating experimentation, these and the pieces that soon followed also displayed LeCompte's early attraction to dramatic texts. For instance, Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* was a constituent of *Nayatt School*, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* of *Route 1&9,* Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* of *Point Judith* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* an element of *L.S.D. ...Just the High Points*, until Miller denied the group the rights. While most of these play texts were used as "material," and not as drama, we might today see these early citations as harbingers of the Group's return to staging full dramatic texts, for instance their version of Racine's *Phedre* (*To You, the Birdie!* [2002]) and *Hamlet,* in 2007. After fifteen years of staging his own works, Wilson staged *King Lear* (1985), and since then, in addition to opera, has staged plays by Ibsen and Strindberg, among others. Lee Breuer has had global successes with his productions of *Gospel in Colonnus*, based on *Oedipus at Colonus,* and of *The Mabou Mines Dollhouse*, exuberantly faithful to the text of Ibsen's *A Dollhouse*.

This canonical turn, visible too in Germany despite the fact that the canon and theatrical experimentation have a long linked history there – confronts one with something of a contradiction in regard to Lehmann's central premise. The *Mabou Mines Dollhouse* (2003), with its freak show references, wild dances, jokes, direct address to the audience, falling melodrama silks, opera riffs, and live pianist winking at the actors who in turn wink at the audience, fit many criteria of Lehmann's postdramatic. Yet, with characters, plot, dialogue, and a strong sequential story line, this *Dollhouse* was just as surely dramatic.

Can the "fictive cosmos" be shattered and embraced at the same time? As one surveys the many younger groups in New York that have been influenced by the first generation of 'sixties and 'seventies avant-garde theater artists, there is no single answer to this question. Some create a Wooster-like dialectic, some create a species of variety show, some work with "exploded" dramatic texts in the German manner of a "nach" production. All turn the performance out to the spectators without retreat into a closed dramatic world. Yet a return by whatever circuitous route to the embrace of narrative, what Lehmann describes as the "highly traditionalist" *Fabel-Theater*, theater of story, invades much contemporary postdramatic work (PDT, 33). The tendency is striking enough that the sense of a break in theatrical culture that pervades *Postdramatic Theatre* should be re-examined.

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One can see this return to narrative not only in the stagings of dramatic texts by American experimental theater directors, but in the great range of "performance pieces" that constitute Lehmann's central investigation. Again, my examples are American. Anne Bogart's *Bobrauschenbergamerica*, while essentially plotless, purports to follow a group of neighbors from sun-up to sundown in an "our town"-type back yard on the Fourth of July. The Nature Theater of Oklahoma's live and video show, *Rambo Solo*, tells the comic story of an aging actor's futile longing to play the original Rambo from the David Morrell novel, *First Blood,* if only in his own tiny New York apartment. The piece centrally relies on a passionate retelling of the story. As a case study of the renascence of narrative in experimental theater, however, I offer only one extended example, albeit a significant one. In the six years since its first 2005 open rehearsal, the Elevator Repair Service's *Gatz* has toured the world, played triumphantly in New York, and become a legend of the second generation American "avant-garde" theater.

A Wooster-inspired collective, the Elevator Repair Service (ERS), was founded in 1991 by director John Collins and a group of actors. For the past several years, the group has based its pieces around verbatim readings of iconic American novels, first *The Great Gatsby*, then the opening section of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and presently Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. Though the Wooster Group earlier introduced the idea of a verbatim recitation of a central text, for instance their lightning-speed delivery of Miller's *The Crucible*, the ERS has made the actual reading of a work of fiction the central continuous thread of the performance. Further, their engagement with the Fitzgerald narrative is not "exploded," or based on a pun, or intended to separate the audience from the easy pleasures of plot and character. Its mordant irony seems not a distancing device aimed at the text, but rather an interpretation of the world of the text. Notwithstanding the dislocations I will describe, the affective life of *Gatz* takes place in the realm of narrative realism. The answer to the question "What are we following?" is the plot and characters of Fitzgerald's novel, and the ERS audiences do so, rapt, for hours.

At first one might think that *Gatsby*'s "fictive cosmos" had been jettisoned entirely. The ERS doesn't set its visual performance of *Gatz* on a bucolic image of the North Shore of Long Island, but in a dingy urban office space of the early 1980s. Framed in by open shelves groaning with paper files, the furnishings include a worn fake leather sofa, tattered desk chairs on wheels, and a center work table bearing an old Olivetti typewriter and a first generation desktop computer.

The first office worker to drift in, played by the prodigious Scott Shepard, an actor who moves back and forth between ERS and the Wooster Group, flips on the lights and boots up the recalcitrant computer. Hidden in his Rolodex is a copy of *The Great Gatsby*. He reads aloud, idly, passing time, as workers arrive and the day at the office begins. So begins Shepard's seven-hour reading of the entire novel, with office workers swirling into the story, performing the central roles in snatches of dialogue or mime, then falling back into the motions of office routines. With help from a rich sound score, scenes from the novel are conjured up out of air, it seems, and just as lightly dispersed. Again and again we convert the shabby scene before us into a shimmering idyll of the mind as we "see" Gatsby's parties, the Buchanan estate, and the sunset over the water..

Why the office setting? This is the audience's problem to explain, or ignore. One could suppose that the group began rehearsals in an old office, and was presenting its process in the public show. Or one could speculate, for instance, that the iconic American setting of the workplace serves as counterpoise to

the iconic setting of American wealth and privilege; that the office stands to the book as the opposing worlds of the book stand to each other: Tom and Daisy's world of unconscious privilege and Jay Gatz's humble midwestern origin; Gatsby's glittering parties and Willson's shabby auto repair shop; the unattainable world of "old money" and the corrupt world of fast money. Whichever, or neither, the office becomes a kind of projection screen for the imagination, with each poor door, cubicle, or chair, standing in for a luxurious or scandalous other.

But the *Gatz* experience in the theater exceeds this model of a doubled experiential world as the spectator's visual, aural, and readerly imaginations are engaged on discrete tracks. This is "poor theater" with a baroque dramaturgy, and still these tracks converge in support of a single grand fiction.

Does the Elevator Repair Service offer the spectator a shattered fictive cosmos, as theorized in *Postdramatic Theatre*, or a layered one; the explosion of a fictive cosmos, or its further complication? Many aspects of this production can be identified in Lehmann's index of postdramatic theater traits, such as its marathon length and its "musicalization". Yet the Fitzgerald narrative stirred in its audience the kind of emotional and imaginative engagement generated by the fictive cosmos of traditional theater, here a cosmos of the imagination.

One might argue that *The Great Gatsby* is so familiar to American audiences that it will recreate its world under whatever pressure. Several months before the ERS offered its first performances of *Gatz,* the *NewYork Times* in a community reading experiment printed the entire novel in weekly installments. The ERS could assume its audience's familiarity with the settings, figures, and plot of Fitzgerald's novel. As was arguably the case with such familiar texts as *Dollhouse* or *Hamlet* or the Rambo story, a presumption of audience familiarity with the underlying text was built in to the production. A "fictive cosmos", at least at the level of the spectator's imagination, came pre-installed. The same could not be said, by comparison, for the Wilson "operas" that launch the postdramatic epoch, and not even for the Racine of LeCompte's *To You, the Birdie!,* which leaves its audience in admiration of the Wooster Group's virtuosity, but not in mourning, as in *Gatz,* for its victims of fatal passion.

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So, are there holes in the cosmos of no-cosmos? What is the status of the theoretically superannuated "dramatic" in such an example? Are we up

against an absolute contradiction, such as that faced by the Billionaire's Son in Kaiser's expressionist *Gas I*, whose gas factory explodes and is reduced to rubble despite the Engineer's assurance that "the formula is correct"? I see two ways out of this impasse. One is that the formula is correct, and drama and theater have gone their separate ways. Yet Lehmann's definition of "drama" from which theater departs is so restrictive (he at one point restricts it to a "century-old fixation with moving human fortunes" [95]) that most of the dramatic tradition is excluded as not in fact dramatic. The realist definition of the dramatic saves the "formula", yet it also shrinks Lehmann's portent of a millennial transformation to a fluctuation. If the "fictive cosmos" in its ideal, closed form can be shrunk to fourth-wall realism almost everything traditionally regarded as drama is "outside the box".

The other is that the formula even on its own terms is not correct. Anglo-American critical tradition, less exacting than the German, is willing to admit the ancient Greeks, the 15th-century English of the religious plays, and the Elizabethans into its tent of the "dramatic". My argument admittedly rests on this more inclusive and evolutionary view of the dramatic form. But even within Szondi's distinct if narrower boundaries, a contradiction lurks. I return to the variation that Lehmann works on Szondi's positioning of Brecht in 20th century dramatic form.

As is well known through his famous comparative chart, Brecht saw epic dramaturgy as a break with Aristotelian tradition. Szondi concedes Brecht's innovations. "Epicization" was one way out of the "crisis" of the dialogic tradition. Lehmann follows Szondi in foreshortening the dramatic, but in turn extends its life. Thus Brecht is no longer a border guard.

> *What Brecht achieved can no longer be understood one-sidedly as a revolutionary counter-design to tradition. In the light of the newest developments, it becomes increasingly apparent that, in a sense, the theory of epic theatre constituted a renewal and completion of classical dramaturgy.* (PDT, 33)

This repositioning of Brecht within the purview of the dramatic not only undermines Szondi but opens Lehmann's thesis too to the canker of historicization. If Brecht was once viewed as radically *other* to the dramatic, and is now absorbed within it, a shift in perspective could also lessen the distance between drama and its departed twin, theater. Or rather, the two may display, over time, as perhaps suggested by my American examples of the return of narrative theater, a new rapprochement after the divide that Lehmann describes.

I incline to this gradualist view. As Lyotard argued in seeming paradox, the postmodern precedes the modern, the more radical precedes the accommodation. Just as dramatic elements, at least from my American examples, have crept back into performance theater, elements of performance – surrealist flights, Dada explosions, direct address to the audience – appear in the work of many contemporary American playwrights, even on Broadway. This latter route of tentative merger was followed by atonality in classical music, which came to coexist with the tonality it was thought to have banished, and by cubism and abstraction in painting and sculpture, which at one time were thought to spell the end of figurative art. Belatedly following the trajectory of these other arts, theater and drama may at last have absorbed 20th century modernism, and show signs of a mutual, renewed, accommodation.

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I myself shared in the enthusiasm for radical breaks in culture fostered by Foucault and other post-structuralists in my study of theatrical postmodernism.[3] Fifteen years later, the term "postmodernism" is historically dated, partly because what was new in postmodernism has now been naturalized, and partly because what was *not new*, but not then recognized as *not new*, has been revealed to be not the end of the world as we knew it, but another face of modernism.

At the time of that writing, I paid a visit to the eminent American philosopher, art critic, and latter-day Hegelian, Arthur Danto. In his office at Columbia University I asked him whether he saw theatre following the same trajectory that he had written about in "The End of Art."[4] Danto floats there the Hegelian thesis that art in the modern period becomes conscious of itself *as art,* and strives to realize the logic of its own process and materials, of which Andy Warhol's Brillo Box becomes the fulfillment. When I suggested that a similar process could be identified in 20th century theater, Danto didn't agree. "Unlike the fine arts," he told me, "theatre isn't progressive, but has oscillated historically between realism and various types of formalism."

I remembered this conversation on reading Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre*. Was theatre, like art in Danto's reading, shedding

[3] See Fuchs, *The Death of Character*: *Reflections on Theater After Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 1996).

[4] For an excellent discussion of the permutations of Danto's multiple publications on this theme, see John K. Bramann, "Understanding the End of Art" at http://faculty.frostburg.edu/phil/forum/forum4/htm.

representation for good, or would the dramatic re-absorb these departures and carry on in altered form? A decade on after the publication of *Postdramatishes Theater* and almost fifty since the inauguration of the contemporary theater of performance (as against the theater of text) evidence suggests that a fictive cosmos is a hard thing to kill. I write this with some disappointment. I sense a tinge of anticipatory nostalgia, too, in Lehmann's verdict on his own enthusiasms.

> *Perhaps in the end postdramatic theatre will only have been a moment in which the exploration of a "beyond representation" could take place on all levels. Perhaps postdramatic theatre is going to open out onto a new theatre in which dramatic figurations will come together again, after drama and theatre have drifted apart so far. A bridge could be the narrative forms, the simple, even trivial appropriation of old stories and (not least of all) the need for a return of conscious and artificial stylization in order to escape the Naturalist glut of images. Something new is going to come...* (PDT, 144)

Summary:

It is Hans-Thies Lehmann's bold argument that postdramatic theater arrives when the "fictive cosmos" of the dramatic work no longer coheres. The dramatic work shreds into its component parts, and the interest of the theatrical event shifts towards the "situation" of the live performance in the present moment. More than ten years after the publication of his book, has the postdramatic continued to make inroads into narrative theater? The "view from America" over the past decade suggests that "advanced" theater work, such as Lee Breuer's "Mabou Mines Dollhouse", or the Elevator Repair Service's "Gatz", may clearly be postdramatic yet at the same time retain the organizing principle of the fictive cosmos. What then happens to the theory of the postdramatic? Just as the once-sharp distinction between the tonal and the atonal in 20th century music has melted away into a range of available musical styles, it may be that the dramatic is re-absorbing the great period of 20th century experimentation and continuing in an altered form. The fictive cosmos is a hard thing to kill.

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POSTDRAMSKO POZORIŠTE I ISTRAJAVANJE „SVETA FIKCIJE", POGLED IZ AMERIKE

Rezime:

Postdramsko pozorište pojavljuje se kada je „svet fikcije" dramskog dela razgrađen, smela je tvrdnja Hans-Tisa Lemana. Dramsko delo raspada se na svoje sastavne delove, a fokus pozorišnog događaja pomera se na „situaciju" izvođenja uživo, u sadašnjem trenutku. Više od deset godina posle objavljivanja njegove knjige, da li je postdramsko nastavilo da zadire u polje narativnog pozorišta? Pogled iz Amerike na poslednju deceniju sugeriše da „napredna" pozorišna ostvarenja, kao što su *Mabou Mines Dollhouse* Lija Bruera ili *Gatz* trupe Elevator Repair Service, nesumnjivo mogu da budu postdramska, a da pri tome zadržavaju organizacione principe sveta fikcije. Šta se onda dešava s teorijom postdramskog? Kao što je i nekada oštra razlika između tonalne i atonalne muzike u 20. veku nestala u nizu postojećih muzičkih stilova, moguće je da dramsko apsorbuje veliki period eksperimenta iz 20. veka i nastavlja dalje u izmenjenoj formi. Svet fikcije je teško ubiti.